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**STATE PLAN AIMS TO INTEGRATE CARE SO CHILDREN ENTER SCHOOL
HEALTHY, READY AND ABLE TO LEARN**

(RICHMOND, Va.)--The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has led development of a state plan designed to enable more children to start school healthy, ready and able to learn. National estimates have found that 25 to 40 percent of children are not ready to be successful in school.

Since 2003, more than 100 representatives from state agencies and private organizations have worked to create the Early Childhood State Plan, which coordinates existing programs and services into a more family-centered, prevention-oriented system of services that support the health and development of children and enable them to enter school ready to learn.

“Our current system of care is fragmented,” said State Health Commissioner, Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “This plan can help integrate care, create nurturing environments and foster strong family involvement, factors which predict success in school.”

The plan’s first-year priorities include:

- Development of strong state and local leaders to coordinate and integrate services
- Creation of a virtual warehouse of data and technical assistance
- Exploring development of uniform performance measures across agencies
- Building enhanced planning and delivery of services.

The plan also calls for marketing the importance of early learning and nurturing environments to the general public and potential partners, and exploring resources to improve programs and services.

“Research shows that early childhood is a period of substantial brain development, which significantly impacts a child’s emotional and intellectual abilities,” Dr. Stroube said. “The more we can do to ensure solid development, the better we’ll serve the future success of our children.”

Brain development is influenced by certain environmental stressors and negative risk factors, such as early and prolonged exposure to poor nutrition, fear and violence. Virginia families face a number of critical challenges. Thirteen percent of Virginia children live in poverty and 17 of every 1,000 births in Virginia are to mothers between the ages of 15 and 17. The annual state and federal investment for Virginia children under age 5 is \$1,068 per child. By comparison, \$7,654 is spent for each school-age child in Virginia.

The Early Childhood State Plan is an outgrowth of Virginia’s Early Childhood Initiative. The plan is available at www.vdh.virginia.gov. You can also learn about the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation by visiting www.smartbeginnings.org. The site provides resources for businesses, families, professionals and communities that want to build and improve early childhood programs.

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